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ABSTRACT

The frequently referred-to "generation gap" is a myth as yet unsubstantiated by empirical evidence. Explicit definitions of the phenomenon are lacking; implicit definitions are ambiguous and hard to extract. To offer an empirically tested operational definition of "generation gap" and analyze its relationship to several independent social variables, a questionnaire was given to the freshman and junior classes of each of 4 high schools in the midwest, and on the west and east coasts. Using as the definition of generation gap "index of identification with Adult Authority Figures" (i.e., parents, teachers, administrators, policemen), considerable variation was found. A steady increase in adult identification was found with increase in socioeconomic status. Success in school, as measured by grades, and identification with certain traditional middle-class ideals, for example gratification deferral, could also be used to predict adult identification. Religion was also a factor--Jews proved most likely to identify with adult authorities, and unchurched and Liberal Protestants, least likely. Age and sex, however, made no appreciable difference in identification with adult authorities. (KS)

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THE GENERATION GAP: MYTHS AND MEASURES*

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THE GENERATION GAP MYTHS AND MEASURES

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For several years now we have been hearing about a "generation gap". The term has had currency primarily in popular literature, but it has been used also by social scientists and other scholars writing in professional journals. An example of the latter case would be the article by anthropologist Margaret Mead, in which she referred unequivocally to " . . . the fact of a deep, new, unprecedented, worldwide generation gap . . ." (Mead, 1968, quoted in Brunswick, 1970: 358). We think of this statement as perhaps typical because, like the overwhelming majority of the other commentators on the "generation gap", Dr. Mead cites but little evidence (and none of it systematic) to show that there is <u>any</u> kind of generation gap, to say nothing of one which is "deep" or "unprecedented" or "new" or "worldwide"! In our bibliographical research generally, indeed, we were surprised at the scarcity of articles which could lay any claim to an <u>empirical basis</u> for postulating a generation gap. Fewer still made any attempt even to define the term. In view of the wide currency which the term has acquired in the absence of systematic evidence, we suggest that at this particular time, at least, it qualifies for the label "myth" - which is not necessarily to deny that a generation gap exists, but only to say that it has not yet been empirically established. If we are correct in considering this concept a myth, then it follows that statement's like Dr. Mead's are at best premature and perhaps even professionally irresponsible, especially in view of the hand-wringing rhetoric which so often accompanies such statements.

Difficulties with the "generation gap" concept occur both at the theoretical and at the operational levels. Theoretically, the concept partakes of the same

kind of vagueness as do the concepts of "alienation" and "culture lag" which have been widely discussed and criticized elsewhere (Feuer, 1962 and 1969, Chapter 10; Seeman, 1961; Israel, 1971; Appelbaum, 1970; Heberle, 1951; and Ogburn, 1964). Indeed, one could plausibly argue that the notion of generation gap is simply a variation (or perhaps synthesis) of these more classical notions, if only because so much of the earlier literature shows that they anticipated and subsumed it. (e.g., Mannheim, 1952; Heberle, 1951; Ogburn, 1964; and Feuer, 1969). And in the way in which "generation gap" has been used in various recent literature, it is difficult to see what the notion adds theoretically to the earlier concepts.

At the operational level, the situation is no better. One looks in vain for an explicit definition in most articles on the generation gap, and the implicit definitions are ambiguous and hard to extract. While at least a good guess can be made in the case of an article which employs empirical data and operational indicators, only a small proportion of the literature does so: the rest is social commentary which tends to assume that the reader already knows what the term means. For example, Friedenberg (1969) finds a "generational conflict" in analyzing various "rock" artists and their music, but he never tells us what the term means. Allen Larson (1970) sees portents of political and social change in what he calls the "conflict of generations", but again he offers no definition of the key concept and no empirical data to establish that the condition even exists. Some employ the term "generation" when they are actually referring to the characteristics of only a segment of the youth, namely college students. Keniston (1968), for example, was dealing with only a handful of students at one of the better universities. Feuer (1969) has an extremely lengthy and erudite work on the "conflict of generations", but it is clear as soon as one opens the cover that the book deals with a cross-cultural and historical study of radical student movements, quite a different phenomenon.

from a gaping schism between two entire generations. What virtually none of the literature does is to define either "generation" or "gap". What are the "generations" between which there is supposed to be a "gap"? Is age 30 the dividing line? Are we talking about the youth vs. their parents, and if so, which youth? High school youth? College Youth? Both? What kind of 'gap" do we have in mind? Value commitments? Which ones? All of them? Sex norms? Dress and fashion norms? Political beliefs? Religious beliefs? And then, after we have answered all such questions, after we have specified what the "generations" are and what kind of "gap" there is, there is a final (and very important) question of whether the gap is really "unprecedented" (as Margaret Mead and others claim) or whether it is a recurrent historical phenomenon which is simply receiving more publicity these days.

When we turn to such empirical evidence as has been published, we find the support for the notion of "generation gap" to be totally dependent upon the operational definition being employed, and, indeed, to be nil to equivocal in some of the respects that have received the greatest public concern. Take, for example, the Viet-Nam War. The most thorough and systematic study to date of public opinion on the war was based upon Michigan Survey Research Center data and published by Converse and Schuman (1970). We quote one of their principal conclusions:

> "The 'generation gap' that one would have expected, wherein the young oppose the war and the old support it, simply failed to appear (until recently) and even now it is not very large. Indeed . . . it can be shown . . . as of 1968 that (among Whites) college-educated people in their twenties were more likely than older people of grade-school education both to justify the war and to favor an intensification of it." (p. 22).

Furthermore, even such opposition to the war as there has been has had a pragmatic basis rather than a moral one; and war protestors were viewed negatively by 63 per cent of even those who believed that the war was a mistake. (24). Converse and Schuman point out that anti-war sentiment has been strong, of course, on

several college campuses, especially the large prestigious ones but that fewer than 25 per cent of college-educated people have ever had contact with one of these campuses (23).

Another empirically based article by Lubell (1968), while again failing to provide a definition of "generation gap," reports on an analysis of a large body of survey data from college campuses, and concludes that only about 10 per cent of the respondents showed signs of a definite break with the older generation. A critical determinant in this study was the extent to which the young get integrated into the adult career world.

An extremely valuable article by Brunswick (1970) surveys and synthesizes the results of six large-scale empirical studies bearing on the question of a "generation gap". Again we quote one of her major conclusions:

> "There is considerable evidence (Lubell, Yankelovich) that working-class youth, and even the majority of white college youth -- those who have a definite career goal and means of entering the occupational structure-- do not differ so widely from their parents in basic attitudes and values." (358)

Brunswick examines evidence on three kinds of generational belief differences: outlook on life, racial tolerance/hostility, and advocacy of racial rioting. She concludes that race and education make at least as much difference as does age (and probably more) in creating "gaps" over those three issues. (369). This suggests to us the need for applying controls for such intervening variables before any conclusions can be drawn in any study about the impact of age difference itself.

The periodical Gallup Opinion Index provides a ready source of attitudinal data broken down by age and many other variables (but not, of course, simultaneously). The youngest age category ordinarily appearing in the Gallup data is 21-29, which is above the ordinary high school or college student level but would include the usual graduate student age-group. Some comparisons of this age group with the two older groups (30-49, 50 and over) in recent years have

shown, among other things, that there is little or no variation by age group over the following issues: whether morals or honesty in this country are getting better or worse (Gallup Opinion Index Report #39, 1968), the blame for the racial situation (GOI Report #37, 1968), the speed of integration (#40, 1968), interracial school busing (#58, 1970), the 18-year-old vote (#54, 1969), the all-volunteer army (#44, 1969), the importance of religious influences (#22, 1967, #35, 1968, #57, 1970), and whether people in this society get ahead mainly by luck or by ability (#59, 1970). Marked differences by age-group do appear, however, on the subjects of pre-marital sex (#52, 1969) and the availability of the pill. (#57, 1970). While there is evidence here for some real differences in sexual mores, by age, one is impressed, we would say more by generational similarities than by differences in much of the Gallup data.

Having reviewed the work of several others, we come now to the presentation of our own work. We believe that adding our study to what has already accumulated can make at least three contributions: (1) it will add a bit more empirical data where there is as yet very little; (2) it will furnish data on high school students, which is especially rare, to compare with the college-age data usually offered by others; and (3) it will offer one kind of clear, operational definition of "generation gap" and analyze its relationship to several independent social variables. This study is largely a secondary analysis of data originally gathered in 1968 by a colleague of ours for a large-scale replication of Murray Straus's work on gratification deferral (Garland, 1968; Straus, 1962). The data are derived from 2,361 questionnaires administered to students in four different high schools in the west, the midwest, and the east coast. Of these, 1,180 cases from two of the high schools responded to questions intended to deal with some kind of "generation gap". The questionnaires were administered to the entire freshman and junior classes in each of the schools, under optimum conditions,

by teachers and administrators who were collaborators in the original project. Therefore, although the schools in the sample were not randomly selected, they were located in a variety of regional and ecological settings; furthermore, within each school, the samples taken (i.e., entire grade cohorts) would seem to be fully representative.

The chief dependent variable and operational definition of "generation gap" used here was an "index of identification with Adult Authority Figures." This Index was based upon four attitudinal items in the questionnaire: (1) The principal and other people who run this school seem more interested in keeping students in line than in really helping them; (2) As far as ideas are concerned, parents and children live in different worlds; (3) Most policemen have it in for teenagers and are out to get them; (4) Teachers don't really care much about trying to help young people. Each of these items was scaled in Likert fashion and scored for the Index as follows: 2 points for each "disagree strongly" answer, 1 point for each "disagree somewhat" answer, and zero for any other answers. The resulting composite Index of Identification with Adult Authority Figures had a range of 0 to 8, which was subsequently collapsed into the following four categories: Very low (0 - 1), Low (2 - 3), Medium (4 - 5) and High (6 - 8). The High category had 18% of the cases, Medium 28%, Low 30%, and Very Low 28%. We are clearly, then,defining "generation gap" here as the extent to which our high school students fail to identify with significant adult others such as parents, teachers, administrators, and policemen; and a majority of our sample scored Low or Very Low on our measure of this identification; or in other words they scored 3 or less out of a possible 8. This kind of measure parallels the idea of Feuer, for whom the chief symptom of generational conflict is the "de-authoritization" of adult authorities (1969: 528-30).

Let us look now at the tables which show the influence of certain social

variables upon our Index. Table 1 shows the influence of socio-economic status. Our measure of SES was based solely on father's occupation, with the designation "Lower Middle-Class" referring to a variety of blue-collar or working-class occupations, "Middle-Middle" to clerical and petty white-collar occupations, and "Upper-Middle" to the professional and managerial ranks. Our sample did not seem to include a truly lower-class or upper-class segment. Considering that our measures and our cutting-points between categories are fairly crude, we should perhaps expect little from the middle two rows in these tables. Comparing the first and fourth rows, however, which are at the extremes of our dependent variable, we see a definite trend in Table 1: with an increase in SES, there is a steady increase in High adult identification and a corresponding decrease in Low identification. Clearly SES makes a difference, and it is not the upper-status youth who are most likely to lack identification with significant adults, as some of the literature on student radicals has suggested, (c.g., Keniston, 1968).

(Table 1 about here)

According to Tables 2 and 3, however, age and sex make no appreciable difference in identification with adult authorities. Only rarely is there a change of as much as 5 percentage points from one category to another in any of the four rows in either table. We can safely conclude that our particular operational measure of "generation gap" is not affected by either age or sex.

(Tables 2 and 3 about here)

A factor that does seem to matter, however, is success in school, as measured by grades. In our questionnaire, self-reported grades of "mostly A's and B's" were considered "above average," "mostly C's" as "average" and all others as "below average." There is no elaborate theory needed to guess

why there should be a relation between school and success and attitudes toward adults.

(Table 4 about here)

Among the measures which were developed for the original study mentioned above (Garland, 1968) was a generalized Index of Gratification Deferral, based upon items intended to indicate the extent to which a student identified with traditional middle-class adult notions of saving, deferring, etc. This Index was scored in a manner similar to our earlier scoring procedure. Clearly, according to Table 5, there is a strong relation between identification with certain traditional middle-class ideals and identification with authority figures themselves. Again, in Tables 4 and 5, as in Table 1, the relationship can best be seen in a comparison of the top and bottom rows.

(Table 5 about here)

Finally, we shall see to what extent religious denomination matters for identification with adults. Table 6 has the Protestant denominations grouped and arranged in the general manner suggested by Glock and Stark (1965), with the addition of Roman Catholics, Jews, and those claiming no formal religion. The most interesting columns in this table are those for Liberal Protestants, No Formal Religion, and Jews. Again, contrary to what we might expect from some of the literature on student radicals, the Jews in our sample were the most likely to identify in medium or strong degrees with adult authorities. The unchurched and the Liberal Protestants, however, were the <u>least</u> likely. Since these are the categories most loosely tied to traditional American religion, it is perhaps not so surprising to find them identifying least with traditional authority figures of other kinds.

(Table 6 about here)

Time and space here do not permit a more thorough discussion of the implications of our own findings, or of the larger issue of the "generation gap,"

beyond the following cursory conclusions which seem to emerge from our presentation, and which we offer for consideration: (1) The concept of "generation gap" has little heuristic value until it is clearly defined and formulated in operational terms; (2) Whether or not one finds evidence for a generation gap depends entirely on the operational definition used in the research effort; (3) Empirical research published up to the present time has not generally found evidence for a generation gap with the kinds of measures that have been used; (4) The original data presented here have been measured with an Index which has operationally defined the generation gap in terms of identification (or lack of it) with adult authority figures. Using this particular measure, a little over half of the teenagers in our sample failed to identify with adult authority to at least a "medium" degree, but there was considerable variation in this identification according to SES, school success, religion, and gratification deferral. Neither age nor sex made a difference. The most likely kind of youngster to be involved in a "generation gap" in our terms would be a working-class, unchurched student with poor grades and low gratification deferral, or, in other words, one clearly not part of the "establishment." Whether we are justified in speaking of a generation gap in other segments of the social structure is questionable, and whether we can conclude that this kind of gap in this particular part of the social structure is unprecedented would be highly doubtful. This is the segment, after all, from which we also recruit disproportionately our juvenile delinquents (Cohen, 1955; Short, 1968). And, as in the case of delinquency, the generation gap can perhaps be sufficiently explained by reference to differential socialization.

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TABLES FOR

"The Generation Gap: Myths and Measures"

(Mauss and Winston)

Table 1 : Socio-Economic Status

	Lower-Middle	Middle-Middle	Upper-Middle
Ident. with Adult Auth. Figures:			
Very Low	29%	24%	18%
Low	31	32	26
Medium	27	26	33
High	13	19	23
N (100%) =	353	480	355

Table 2 : Age

	13-14	15	16	17+
Ident. with Adult Auth. Figures:				
Very Low	20%	25%	22%	23%
Low	32	28	34	31
Medium	28	30	27	28
High	20	17	18	18
N (100%) =	294	342	280	273

Table 3 : Sex

	Male	Female
Ident. with Adult Auth. Figures :		
Very Low	25%	22%
Low	31	29
Medium	28	29
High	16	20
N (100%) =	548	640

Table 4 : Grades

	Above Aver.	Aver.	Below Aver.
Ident. with Adult Auth. Figures :			
Very Low	14%	31%	44%
Low	27	33	22
Medium	33	24	28
High	27	11	7
N (100%) =	560	573	55

Table 5 : Gratification Deferral

Ident. with Adult Auth. Figures :	Very Low	Low	Medium	High
Very Low	42%	27%	20%	15%
Low	30	34	32	21
Medium	21	28	30	32
High	7	11	18	33
N (100%) =	179	229	535	245

Table 6 : Religious Affiliation

Ident. with Adult Auth. Figures	No Formal	Lib Prot.	Mod. Prot.	Cons. Prot.	Fund. Prot.	Roman Cath.	Jew
Very Low	32%	23%	19%	26%	18%	22%	5%
Low	31	27	31	35	23	30	35
Medium	25	36	29	21	34	27	35
High	12	14	21	19	25	22	26
N (100%) =	155	226	42	176	61	431	43